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TECHNOLOGY

On-Call Computer Whiz Rescues People From the Gremlins in Their Machines

By ALEX MARKELS

Staff Reporter of THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

With just 45 minutes to go before a video-game maker's presentation to Wall Street analysts, chaos reigns at the Pierre Hotel in New York. The computer-video system that will display the graphics for the chief financial officer's presentation is on the blink, and the hotel's video technician is nowhere to be found.

Rolling to the rescue: Michael Volchok, a 27-year-old free-lance consultant who can fix just about any problem related to Apple computers.

Mr. Volchok is one of a growing number of consultants who play saviors in the computer dramas that unfold in America's offices every day. With increasingly complex software and hardware, mutating viruses and snarled communications networks, system conflicts and crashes have become regular occurrences. So Mr. Volchok and others have set up shop as on-call fixers for the many professionals who depend on computers but don't have a clue about how to fix them. Working alone or for larger consulting companies, the troubleshooters' hourly fees range from \$30 to more than \$200.

Mr. Volchok, who charges \$125 an hour, works primarily for small and mid-size businesses, and almost exclusively in Manhattan. That keeps him plenty busy. His answering machine stuffed with messages and his beeper constantly buzzing, Mr. Volchok bounds through Manhattan on his Rollerblades, visiting three or four clients a day. He routine-

ly works 10-hour days and on weekends.

His specialty is Apple computers, which he has been tinkering with since high school. After earning a degree in international relations from the University of Chicago in 1991, Mr. Volchok managed day-to-day operations for a nonprofit Macintosh users' group in New York City.

"People would constantly call asking for help and referrals," he recalls. Yearning to start his own business and figuring he could answer most questions, he began recommending himself to callers. Three years ago, he quit his job, bought the client list of a small consulting firm and set about building his own company.

Since then, Volchok Associates has grown from three to about 100 active clients, he says. Mr. Volchok has a staff of four full-time consultants, and the company, privately held by him, had more than \$1 million in revenue last year.

At 6 foot 4 inches, with long black hair tied in a ponytail, scraggly beard, oversized parka and baggy jeans, Mr. Volchok looks like the quintessential techie. He acts the part, too, spending much of his free time surfing the Internet, gathering free software and playing computer games. He scans piles of computer trade magazines for fixes and ideas.

With just a half-hour until the video-game maker's presentation, Mr. Volchok and the tardy hotel technician frantically switch cables and connect sockets. "Bingo," Mr. Volchok says as

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Elliott Banfield

Michael Volchok

On-Call Consultant Helps People Fight Gremlins in Machines

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the screen at the front of the room lights up.

The next day, Mr. Volchok sits in the office of the president of the ad agency that designed the presentation. "I've been through four consultants in four years," says Michael Racz, founder of the ad agency, RDA International Inc., which chose Mr. Volchok to install and network \$270,000 of computers in the past month. "Finding someone who you can trust and who shows up when you need him is next to impossible."

Mr. Volchok says he gives his clients blunt opinions on everything from choosing Internet providers to deciding which employees should get the most powerful computers. He's also blunt about his clients, who sometimes make panicky calls for help fixing mistakes they could easily fix themselves. "I spend 10% to 20% of my time fixing really stupid stuff," he says. Before he leaves the ad agency, a managing partner asks him to troubleshoot a client's laptop computer and hook it to the Internet. Mr. Volchok spends the next 20 minutes on hold with the Internet provider, only to be asked to leave a message. "Boy is this stupid," he shouts into the phone.

When he finally gets through, he learns that the client got his password wrong. He plugs the computer into a phone line and punches in the correct password. It connects.

By the time he pushes the elevator button, he's already 20 minutes late for his next appointment at Blender magazine, an interactive magazine. For \$1,000 a month, he's agreed to come two hours each week for routine tweaking and another five "emergency" hours when things get dire.

"Start right away with Zoe," says David Cherry, the company's co-founder. "Her screen keeps freezing."

Mr. Volchok strides into the office of the art director, Zoe Chan. "What did you do now?" he inquires with a smile.

Ms. Chan shrugs her shoulders. "Everyday it's something different," she complains. "It's frozen three times today. Then I get this lame message: 'Floating coprocessor not installed.'"

"Which programs is it freezing in?" he asks.

"All of them, I think," she says.

Mr. Volchok grabs the computer mouse and clicks through menus in rapid fire, searching for software conflicts and outdated versions — by far the most common problems he sees. Within a few minutes he's narrowed it down to the antiquated software for a circuit board that captures video images.

He heads down the hallway in search of an Internet-connected computer. Dale Hrabí, who manages the company's World Wide Web site, willingly steps aside. When his hard disk crashed just before a critical deadline last month, Mr. Volchok came to the rescue. "It was like waiting for a heart transplant," says a grateful Mr. Hrabí.

Mr. Volchok pulls up the "Macintosh Homepage," an electronic cheat sheet that offers fixes for assorted bugs and glitches. "Shhhh," he says under his breath. "No one's supposed to know about this."

He finds the updated software he needs and downloads it. But before he can get back down the hall to install it, another worker tugs at his sleeve. "My computer doesn't print," cries Jennifer Von Feldt. "And I'm the publisher!"

Mr. Volchok steps into her office and grabs her computer mouse. Her files are disorganized, and she's got multiple versions of the same word-processing and spreadsheet programs. A few clicks and it's ready to print again. "Now I never have to learn computers," Ms. Von Feldt says cheerfully. "I can just say, 'Fix it.'"